Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 32 (2002): 209–216

Newly discovered Sabaic inscriptions from Maḥram Bilqīs, near Mārib

MOHAMMED MARAQTEN

The American Foundation for the Study of Man has completed its fourth season of excavation at the Sabaean temple Maḥram Bilqīs.[1] This paper presents some of the epigraphic discoveries from all four seasons, and in particular those of the most recent season of 2001.

Several long inscriptions were discovered during the four seasons. Including fragmentary texts, and the stonemasons' marks, which were treated as inscriptions and given numbers, we have several hundred inscriptions. These will be studied and published by a team of epigraphists consisting of Yusuf Abdallah, President of the General Organization of Antiquities, Manuscripts and Museums of Yemen (Chief Epigraphist), Muṭahhar al-Iryānī and Mohammed Maraqten. Each inscription has been given a siglum made up of the initials AFSM plus the year and a number in the sequence of discovery.

In the first season (1998), we uncovered six (Ja 552–557) of the eight wall inscriptions recorded by Jamme, which are engraved on the exterior of the ovoid wall on the north-western and western sides of the temple (Ovoid Precinct). Ja 550–557 inform us primarily about the construction of the wall of the Ovoid Precinct. Most of these inscriptions were published without photographs, but fortunately, they are still *in situ* and we have now fully documented all of them (see, for example, Glanzman 1999: figs 6, and 10–13).[2] Unfortunately parts of the inscriptions copied by Jamme during the AFSM excavations in the early 1950s are totally or partially lost, the local inhabitants of the area having removed the blocks on which they were carved. For instance, Ja 550 and 551 have been removed altogether, as has part of Ja 557 (= MB 98 I-1). When it was discovered in 1951, it was already incomplete and since the 1950s two metres at the end of the inscription have also been lost (Glanzman 1999: fig. 16). The first part of Ja 554 (= MB 98 I-20) is lost, but fortunately Ja 552 (= MB 98 I-16) and Ja 553 (= MB 98 I-26) are still *in situ* (on Fig. 1, the north-west gate, the upper inscription is Ja 552 and the lower is Ja 553) as are Ja 555 (= MB 98 I-9) and Ja 556 (= MB 98 I-8). It should be noted that the interpretation of some architectural terms in these inscriptions is still uncertain. For instance the *Sabaic Dictionary* [SD] (p. 100) gives the meaning 'type of building' for the term *nṭʿ* in Ja 557 and *mġbt* as 'curtain wall' (SD, p. 53). An interdisciplinary study of these technical terms in relation to architecture would help us understand their exact meaning.



FIGURE 1. *The north-west gate showing the inscriptions Ja 552 = MB 98 I–16 (above) and Ja 553 = MB 98 I–26 (below).*

We also discovered two fragments of the royal building inscription of King Karibʾil Watar Yuhanʿim I, king of Sabaʾ and Ḏu Raydān (*c.* AD 45–60) which was

recorded by Glaser (Gl 483 = CIH 373 = MB 98 I-3 + MB 98 I-22; see Glanzman 1999: 82, fig. 15; see also Kitchen 2000: 106).

A newly discovered two-line Middle Sabaic inscription, MB 98 I-10, is engraved on the exterior of the wall of the Ovoid Precinct to the south of the Peristyle Hall (Glanzman, this volume, Fig. 5) It represents an order for regulating visits to the Awām temple and decrees that people are not allowed to stand or to place items in specific places. It starts with the juridical formula *ʾl / ʾs*^{1} 'no body is allowed' which is common in South Arabian inscriptions and especially in Sabaic and it is to be dated to the Middle Sabaic period (second–third centuries AD).

The Maḥram Bilqīs excavation season of 1999 concentrated on the subsurface survey of the temple and sifting through the spoil heap of the AFSM excavations under Wendell Phillips in 1951. In the course of this, some fragmentary inscriptions were found, among them some written with red paint. Of particular interest are some clay impressions of inscriptions on bronze plaques, showing that in the later period inscribed bronze plaques attached to the walls and pillars inside the Peristyle Hall were covered with clay. Another important group consists of short inscriptions written in the minuscule (*zabūr*) script.[3] Only one inscription of this kind was discovered in the excavations of the 1950s and published by Jamme (Ja 768). The script is described by J. Ryckmans as graffiti cursive (Ryckmans 1986: 188f., 199).[4] The minuscule script was also used for writing ostraca, some of which have recently been found in the Awām-cemetry by the excavations of the German Archaeological Institute. More short inscriptions, incised in minuscule script on pottery sherds and alabaster, were discovered in the 2001 season.

An important Sabaic inscription was discovered during the 2000 season (MB 2000 I-7). On the north-west side of the Peristyle Hall, a few metres away from the ovoid wall of the temple, a new building (no. 1) has been partly uncovered. This new inscription was engraved on the upper part of the west wall of this building (Fig. 2). It consists of six lines and is 360 cm long (Fig. 3). Unfortunately, the right part of the upper four-lines of the inscription is lost, but this does not badly affect our understanding of the text. It mentions several kinds of animals, such as camels, cattle, donkeys, mules, etc., and states that, if these animals are allowed to enter the sacred area of the temple, their owners should pay a penalty to the king. The inscription has a certain formula that is used in the South Arabian laws and decrees, namely the conditional sentence, using the Sabaic particle *hmy* 'if' (SD, p. 56) while the penalty is expressed by the phrase *fl / yfdyn* 'he should pay (money) or redeem'. The following is an example: *...lʾḥd / ʾblm / wkl / ʾfrs*^{1}*m / wʾbġlm / wʾmṣrm / wḥmrm / ḏyʿrbn / ffdym / lhwt / bʿrn* 'for a camel and all horses and mules and baggage camels and donkeys that may enter [the sacred area of the temple] a penalty should be paid for every one'.[5] This inscription shows that there were many different animals around the temple precinct and that their presence caused problems which provoked this decree. This inscription is to be dated to the Middle Sabaean period, but such regulations are known elsewhere in ancient South Arabia. For instance, a similar short inscription has been discovered in the Barʾān temple of the god Almaqah near Mārib. It states that, if a goat enters the sacred area of the temple, it should be killed (DAI Barʾān 1/2, see Nebes 1992).

Important epigraphic discoveries have been made this season (2001). More than 20 inscriptions of more than two-lines have been discovered. They are primarily dedicatory texts, engraved on stone blocks, bronze plaques, or engraved on walls and still *in situ*. Several inscribed blocks have been reused in later walls.

The following are some examples:

1. A bronze plaque MB 2001 I-20

This inscribed bronze plaque was one of the major discoveries of the season. The texts of six-lines in Sabaic has been skilfully fashioned in relief.[6] It runs boustrophedon, a common feature of Early Sabaic inscriptions.

The inscription reads as follows:

1. *lḥyʿṯt / bn / bʿṯtr / bn* ←
2. *ʾls*^{2}*hr / ʾlwnyn / hqny / ʾl* →
3. *mqh / bnhw / ʿmyṯʿ / wmẓbʿ* ←
4. *t / ḏhbn / bʿṯtr / wb / ʾlmqh* →
5. *wb / ḏtḥmym / wb / ḏtbʿdn* ←
6. *wb / yṯʿʾmr / wbydʿʾl /* →

Translation

1. Luḥayʿaṯt son of Biʿaṯtar of [the family]
2. ʾIls^{2}ahar, the Alwanite, has dedicated to [the god]
3. Almaqah, his son ʿAmmyaṯaʿ and the inscribed plaque
4. in bronze. By ʿAṯtar, by Almaqah,
5. by Ḏāt Ḥamīm, by Ḏāt Baʿdān,
6. by Yaṯaʿamar and by Yadaʿʾil

The dedicator Luḥayʿaṯt identifies himself as *ʾlwnyn*, 'the Alwanite', a *nisbah* formed from the place name *ʾlw* (modern Kawkabān), which is the location of a fortress



FIGURE 2. *General view of Area A, showing the façade of Building I and the location of inscription MB 2000 I-7 on the upper part to the left.*

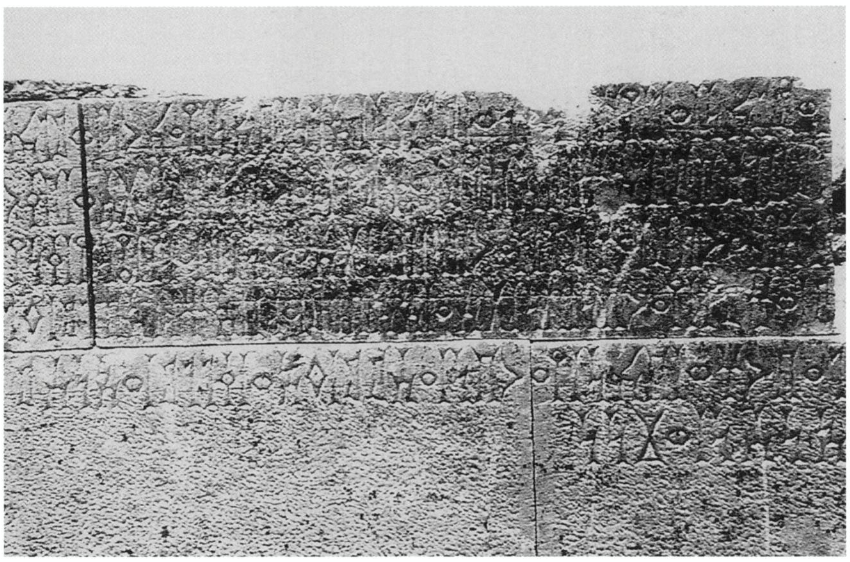


FIGURE 3. *Part of inscription MB 2000 I-7.*

and temple near modern Shibām Aqyān, north-west of Sanʿāʾ (Al-Sheiba 1987: 17). The temple, which was established in the fortress of Alwu, was dedicated to the Sabaean god Almaqah, and bears the name Awām, the same as the Sabaean name of Maḥram Bilqīs. Thus, the dedicator of the bronze plaque was a Sabaean citizen from the highlands of Yemen, who visited Maḥram Bilqīs and presented the bronze plaque to the god Almaqah.

The present inscription marks the first attestation of the term *mẓbʿt* in South Arabian. The word derives from the root *ẓbʿ* and has the *mfʿl*-form with feminine *–t* ending, and may be interpreted as *maẓbūʿat* 'impressed, imprinted'. Actually, the root *ẓbʿ* is related to the Semitic root *ṭbʿ*, which has the meaning 'to sink, sink down, to impress'. This root corresponds to the classical Arabic root *ṭabaʿa* 'impress, mark, imprint'.[7]

The text is written boustrophedon and the archaic palaeographical features of individual letters assign the inscription to the Old Sabaic period and in particular to the fifth century B.C.

Several inscribed bronze plaques from Yemen are known and some are even said to have come from Maḥram Bilqīs, the majority of these being dedications. However, since almost all the known inscribed bronze plaques from Yemen were acquired on the antiquities market rather than from scientific excavations, this piece is of considerable importance since we know its archaeological context.

2. MB 2001 I-16 (Gl 484 = CIH 957 = RES 3624)

This inscription is 11 m long and is engraved on the east side of the ovoid wall adjacent to the Peristyle Hall (Fig. 4, and see Glanzman, this volume, Fig. 3). This inscription was recorded by Glaser in a hand-copy during his visit to Mārib in 1888 (Müller DH & Rhodokanakis 1913: 137). Soon after, it was covered by sand and was not seen again until its rediscovery in 2001. The text consists of a single line which reads as follows:

/ ydʿʾl / ḏrḥ / bn / s^{1}mhʿly / mkrb / s^{1}bʾ / gnʾ / ʾwm / byt / ʾlmqh / ywm / ḏbḥ / ʿṯtr / / whwṣt / kl / gwm / ḏʾlm / ws^{2}ymm / wḏḥblm / w[ḏḥmrm .... ../ bʾlm]qh

Translation

'Yadaʿil Ḏarīḥ, son of Sumuhuʿalī, mukarrib of Sabaʾ has constructed the ovoid wall of Awām, the temple of



FIGURE 4. *Parts of inscription MB 2001 I-16.*

Almaqah, when he gave a sacrifice to the god ʿAṯtar and organized every community that has a god and patron as well as the [community that has a covenant and federation bond. By ʿAṯtar and by Alma]qah.'

The last part of the inscription is damaged. Even when Glaser recorded the inscription in 1888 he noted a small damaged section (Müller DH & Rhodokanakis 1913: 46, 137). The damaged part is now about 170 cm long and contains part of the unification formula and the invocation of three deities. The last two letters are still visible and prove that the last deity to be invoked is Almaqah. In his publication of this inscription, Rhodokanakis (1917: 7–11) restored the invocation as 'by ʿAṯtar and Hawbas and by Almaqah'. Glaser's translation of this text in his *Reise nach Marib* (Müller DH & Rhodokanakis 1913: 137), restores only *bʿṯtr* without restoring *whwbs^1*. Our restoration of this lost passage is based on a the calculation of the width of the letters; and the spaces between them. On this basis, there is room only to restore *bʿṯtr / wbʾlm]qh*, just as Glaser did.

The inscription documents the building of the Awām temple by Yadaʿʾil Ḏarīḥ during the first half of the seventh century BC and contains the so-called unification formula, which is well known in the mukarrib period. The Mukarrib Yadaʿʾil is known as a builder of temples in Sabaʾ. He built the temple Awām (Maḥram Bilqīs) in Mārib, the temple of Almaqah in Ṣirwāḥ and Ḏu-Maʿrabum, modern al-Masājid, a temple of Almaqah south of Mārib (von Wissmann 1982: 183–185). Our text is similar to the inscription of Yadaʿʾil Ḏarīḥ from Ṣirwāḥ (CIH 366, Müller WW 1985: 659f.).

3. MB 2001 I-100

This inscription of four lines is engraved on a wall in Area A. It is a legal document and mentions a king Ḏamarʿlī Bayn king of Sabaʾ. The inscription was engraved on two blocks, but the first has been removed with the consequent loss of the first part of the inscription. Unfortunately, part of the remaining text has been destroyed and so it is impossible to tell what followed the word *s^{1}bʾ*. The king mentioned here, Ḏamarʿlī Bayn, may be the father of the Sabaean king Karibʾil Watar Yuhanʿim I, (*c.* AD 45–60), who built part of the north-east section of the ovoid wall of Awām (see above, Gl 483 = CIH 373). However, another Sabaean king of the same name ruled in the second half of the first century BC. The text is dated in the month Ḏu-Hawbas and contains several new Sabaic terms.

4. MB 2001 I-110

This inscription was incised on the same wall and originally consisted of seven lines, five of which were chiselled. It mentions the word *ʾḏbḥm* 'sacrifice', which suggests that the text dealt with the organization of sacrifice.

5. MB 2001 I-101

This inscription is engraved on the northern façade of the ibex frieze structure. It mentions ʿAmdān Bayn Yuhaqbiḍ, king of Sabaʾ and Ḏu-Raydān, and his son Wadadʾil and that both of them set up, for the god Almaqah, lord of Awām, this [statue of a] horse and its rider, out of the property of Almaqah. Unfortunately, the statue is lost and only two holes where it was fixed, are still visible. King ʿAmdān Bayn Yuhaqbiḍ reigned in the second half of the first century AD (*c.* AD 60–70 AD).[8] He is known from several inscriptions in which his son Wadadʾil is also mentioned (Robin 1991: 167–205).

Horses are mentioned several times in the Sabaic inscriptions as the subject of dedications to the god Almaqah (Sima 2000: 63–71) and a number of other inscriptions which refer to horses have recently been discovered at Maḥram Bilqīs.

6. MB 2001 I-108

This 19-line inscription is engraved on a pillar that has been built against the ibex frieze to the eastern side, covering the false window (Figs 5 and 6).[9]
It reads:

1. *s^{2}rḥṯt / ʾzʾd / bn / yh*
2. *ʿn / wʾẖyhw / yhʿn / bn / yhʿn / hqnyw*
3. *ʾlmqh / ṯhwn / bʿl / ʾwm / ṣlmn / ḥ*
4. *mdm / bḏt / hwfy / ʾlmqh / ʿbdhw*
5. *s^{2}rḥṯt / bkl / ʾmlʾ / s^{1}tmlʾ / bʿm*
6. *hw / wlwzʾ / ʾlmqh / hwfyn / ʿbdhw / s^2*
7. *rḥṯt / bkl / ʾmlʾ / yzʾn / s^{1}tmlʾn*
8. *wntḍʿn / bʿmhw / wl / s^{1}ʿdhmw / ʾlmqh*
9. *nʿmtm / wmngt / ṣdqm / wrḍw / wḥẓy / m*
10. *rʾhmw / krbʾl / wtr / yhnʿm / mlk / s^{1}b*
11. *ʾ / bn / whbʾl / yḥz / mlk / s^{1}bʾ / wl / ẖ*
12. *ryn / ʾlmqh / grybt / ʿbdyhw / s^{2}rḥ*
13. *ṯt / wyhʿn / wḏṣḥ / lhmw / bn / bʾs^{1}t*
14. *m / wnkym / wnḍʿ / ws^{2}ṣy / s^{2}nʾm / wls^{1}ʿd / ʾ*
15. *lmqh / ʾdmhw / s^{2}rḥṯt / wyhʿn / ʾṯmr*
16. *w / ʾfql / ṣdqm / bnkl / ʾrḍthmw / w*
17. *ʾs^{1}rrhmw / wʾtythmw / wmfnthmw*
18. *bʿṯtr / whbs^1 / wʾlmqh / wbḏt / ḥmy*
19. *m / wbḏt / bʿdnm / wbs^{2}ms^1 / mlkn / tnf*



FIGURE 5. *The ibex-frieze in Area A with the location of inscription MB 2001 I-108.*



FIGURE 6. *Inscription MB 2001 I-108.*

Translation

1. S^{2}araḥṯat Azʾad son of Yahʿān
2. And his brother Yahʿān son of Yahʿān have dedicated to
3. the god Almaqah Thahwān lord of Awām this
4. statue in gratitude because Almaqah granted His servant
5. S^{2}araḥṯat [an answer] in all the oracles he sought from Him.
6. And may Almaqah continue [to provide] safety for His
7. servant S^{2}araḥṯat in all favours [in which] he will continue to seek
8. and implore from Him. May Almaqah grant them
9. grace and good luck and the goodwill and the favour
10. of their lord Karibʾil Watar Yuhanʿim, king of Sabaʾ,
11. son of Wahabʾil Yaḥūz, king of Sabaʾ, and
12. may Almaqah vouchsafe the body of both His servants S^{2}araḥṯat
13. and Yahʿān and guarantee them security against evil,
14. mischief, harm and the malice of any enemy. And may Almaqah
15. grant His servants S^{2}araḥṯat and Yahʿān fine fruits and
16. crops from their cultivated land and
17. their cultivated valleys and from their crop-yield and from their irrigated lands
18. By ʿAṯtar and Hōbas, Almaqah and by Ḏāt Ḥamīm and by Ḏāt Baʿdānum and by Tanūf, the Sun-goddess of the king.

King Karibʾil Watar Yuhanʿim, son of Wahabʾil Yaḥūz reigned from approximately AD170–185 (??) and is known from several Sabaic inscriptions (Kitchen 1994: 212).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Mrs Merilyn Hodgson Phillips, President of the American Foundation for the Study of Man (AFSM) as well as to Dr Yusuf Abdullah, Director of the General Organization of Antiquities, Manuscripts and Museums of Yemen, with whom several problems in these inscriptions have been studied. I would also like to thank Dr William Glanzman, of the University of Calgary, and Dr Abdu Othman, of the University of Ṣanaʿāʾ with both

of whom several questions relating to the archaeological context of the inscriptions have been discussed.

Notes

[1] On the preliminary results of the recent investigations of the AFSM, see Glanzman 1999: 73–88 and Moorman, *et al.* (2001). The excavations in April/May 2001 focused on extra-mural architecture adjacent to the Peristyle Hall that Wendell Phillips excavated fifty years ago. For the results of the current Maḥram Bilqīs project, see Glanzman (this volume). All the photographs were taken by Mohammed Maraqten and are published with the permission of Mrs Merilyn Hodgson Phillips, President of the AFSM.

[2] Some of these inscriptions have been reinterpreted or translated by other scholars, see for instance the translation of Ja 550 in Müller WW 1985: 661f. and see the bibliography under the sigla of these inscriptions in Kitchen 2000.

[3] On the origin and development of the minuscule script see Ryckmans 2001: 223–235.

[4] There is no doubt that we can consider this inscription as being in a minuscule script. The letters are tiny, the most important feature of the minuscule script. The length of the first line is 6.4 cm and within this space 12 characters are incised and the length and size of the letters is typical of the minuscule written on wood.

[5] For references to animals in the South Arabian inscriptions, see Sima 2000: 22–146.

[6] Bronze was widely used for inscriptions in ancient Yemen. On the technique of manufacturing inscribed South Arabian bronze plaques, see Ryckmans & Vandevivere 1978: 53–65.

[7] This inscribed bronze plaque has been published in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (Maraqten & Abdallah 2002: 49–53).

[8] Kitchen (1994: 205f.) follows Bāfaqīh in dating the reign of ʿAmdan Yuhaqbiḍ to between AD 75–100.

[9] This preliminary translation of the text is based on the SD.

Sigla

CIH	*Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum* IV.
Gl	Inscriptions recorded by E. Glaser.
I	Inscription
Ja	Inscriptions published by A. Jamme in Jamme 1962.
MB	Registration siglum of inscriptions discovered by the AFSM excavations at Maḥram Bilqīs.
RES	*Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique.*
SD	Beeston *et al.* 1982.

References

Beeston A.F.L, Ghul M.A., Müller W.W., Ryckmans J.
1982. *Sabaic Dictionary*. Louvain-la-Neuve: Peeters/Beirut: Librairie du Liban.

Glanzman W.D. 1999. Clarifying the record: the Bayt ʾAwwām revisited. *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 29: 73–88.

(this volume). Some notions of sacred space at the Maḥram Bilqīs in Mārib. *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*: 32.

Jamme A. 1962. *Sabaean Inscriptions from Maḥram Bilqîs (Mârib)*, (Publications of the American Foundation for the Study of Man, 3). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press.

Kitchen K.A. 1994. *Documentation for Ancient Arabia*. Part 1, *Chronological Framework & Historical Sources*. (The world of Ancient Arabia Series). Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

2000. *Documentation for Ancient Arabia. Part 2, Bibliographical Catalogue of Texts*. (The world of Ancient Arabia Series). Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Maraqten M. & Abdallah Y.
2002. A Recently discovered inscribed Sabean bronze plaque from Maḥram Bilqīs near Mārib, Yemen. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 61: 49–53.

Moorman B.J., Glanzman W.D., Maillol J.-M. & Lyttle A.L.
2001. Imaging beneath the surface at Maḥram Bilqīs. *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 31: 179–187.

Müller D.H. & Rhodokanakis N.
1913. *Eduard Glasers Reise nach Mârib*. (Sammlung Eduard Glaser, 1). Wien: Hölder.

Müller W.W. 1985. Altsüdarabische und frühnordarabische Inschriften. Pages 651–668 in O. Kaiser (ed.), *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testament*, Band I/6. Historisch-chronologische Texte III. Gütersloh.

Nebes N. 1992. New Inscriptions from the Bar'an temple (al-ʿAmāʾid) in the Oasis of Marib. Pages 160–164 in A. Harrak (ed.), *Contacts between Cultures. West Asia and North Africa*. i. Selected Papers from the 33rd International Congress of Asian and North African Studies (Toronto, August 14–25, 1990). Lewiston / Queenston / Lampeter.

Robin C.J. 1991. ʿAmdān Bayyin Yuhaqbiḍ, roi de Sabaʾ et de Ḏū-Raydān. Pages 167–205 in *Études Sud-Arabes. Recueil offert à Jacques Ryckmans*, (Publications de l'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain, 39). Louvain-la-Neuve.

Rhodokanakis N. 1917. *Studien zur Lexikographie und Grammatik des Altsüdarabischen*. ii. (Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-historische Klasse, 185/3.). Wien: Hölder.

Ryckmans J. 1986. Une écriture minuscule sud-arabe antique récemment découverte. Pages 185–199 in H.L.J. Vanstiphout, K. Jongeling, F. Leemhuis and G.J. Reinink (eds), *Scripta Signa Vocis. Studies about Scripts, Scriptures, Scribes and Languages in the Near East presented to J.H. Hospers by his pupils, colleagues and friends*. Groningen: Forsten.

2001. Origin and evolution of South Arabian minuscule writing on wood (1). *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 12: 223–235.

Ryckmans J. & Vandevivere I.
1978. Some technical aspects of the inscribed South Arabian bronze inscriptions cast in relief. *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 8: 53–65.

Sima A. 2000. *Tiere, Pflanzen, Steine und Metalle in den altsüdarabischen Inschriften. Eine lexikalische und realienkundliche Untersuchung*. (Veröffentlichungen der Orientalischen Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften und Literatur Mainz, 46). Wiesbaden.

Al-Sheiba A. 1987. Die Ortsnamen in den altsüdarabischen Inschriften. Pages 1–62 in J. Schmidt. *Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen IV*. Mainz.

Wissmann H. von/ed. W.W. Müller.
1982. *Die Geschichte von Sabaʾ II. Das Grossreich der Sabäer bis zu seinem Ende im frühen 4. Jh. v. Chr*. Wien: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Author's address
Dr. Mohammed Maraqten, Seminar für Semitistik der Philipps-Universität, Wilhelm-Röpke-Strasse 6F, D-35032 Marburg / Lahn, Germany.
e-mail maraqten@mailer.uni-marburg.de